



Transportation Choices

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Need for Transportation Choices

The transportation needs and concerns of older adults will become increasingly important over the next few decades.

Michael's 79-year-old mother sometimes stayed at home, even when she preferred to go out shopping or visiting friends. She no longer felt comfortable driving after a few "close calls." Although public transportation was available to the Massachusetts resident, she found it difficult to get to the bus stop and to wait for the bus, especially in the harsh New England winters. Michael would have loved to drive his mother around, but he lives with his family in a town 20 miles away, and Michael and his wife both work full-time.

Fortunately for Michael and his mother, a program offered through a local aging services organization pairs up elderly neighbors with volunteers who can pick them up and drive from place to place. Now Michael's mom can get out again to run errands and visit friends.

Help with transportation for his mother has restored Michael's peace of mind. He no longer worries about her safety, or the safety of others, when she is out. Help with transportation has also made Michael's mother happy again. When she felt isolated and alone, she had started showing signs of depression.

Transportation: A Key Component of Living Well

Michael's mother is lucky. Not all older adults have access to volunteer drivers. Mobility is essential for older Americans who want to maintain their independence. Just like other members of our communities, older Americans need transportation for shopping, healthcare, socializing, and recreational activities. For a growing number of older Americans, transportation to and from employment and volunteer activities is also a critical issue.

The transportation needs and concerns of today's older adults are just the tip of an iceberg, likely to loom much larger over the next few decades. By the year 2030, the number of Americans over age 65 will be more than double what it is today, up to 71.5 million. As the older population grows, it will be important to ensure that all individuals can drive as long and as safely as possible, and that alternatives are available to those who do not drive.

The transportation needs of older Americans vary greatly, depending on health status, lifestyle choices, and location. Some older persons are frail and have special transportation needs. Others want to

access services in the community, but do not drive or own a car. Still others live in suburban and rural areas, where they need to travel over longer distances. According to the Community Transportation Association of America, 40 percent of rural residents live in areas with no public transportation, and more than 20 percent of these residents have access to very limited transportation services. Without other transportation options, many older adults would remain isolated, unable to access healthcare and community-based services, or even to visit with their friends.

Research shows that older persons can often adjust for changes in their physical abilities and that many are able to drive safely into their 70s and 80s. However, many older persons lose the ability to respond quickly, as well as the visual and physical acuity needed to drive safely, and therefore should not operate motor vehicles. The decision to retire from driving might be a difficult one, but it is important for older adults to consider it realistically.

Retiring From Driving: It's a Family Affair

Some older drivers need the support of family and friends to make the transition from driving to utilizing transportation alternatives. To support an older relative in considering and making this transition, family members can:

- Prepare a list of medical, safety, and behavioral concerns related to continued driving.
- Discuss these concerns, as well as the implications of continued driving and the ramifications of traffic accidents, with the family member.
- Get information in writing from any physician or other professional who recommends that the older person stop driving. Have it available for the discussion.
- Investigate all warnings on medications the older driver takes, especially those related to the ability to drive. Do this whether the medications are prescribed or over-the-counter.
- Identify transportation alternatives so the older individual who must stop driving can begin planning how to maintain mobility and independence.

Alternatives to Driving

Retiring from driving does not mean retiring from life! Many transportation services are available in communities across the country for older adults who do not drive. Such alternatives include para-transit, public transportation, senior van services, taxi vouchers, medical vans, and ride-share programs.

To locate resources and transportation options, contact your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA). In a few States, the State Unit or Office on Aging serves as the AAA. To locate the appropriate AAA or local transportation provider, contact the Eldercare Locator, an information and assistance directory supported by the Administration on Aging (AoA). Call the Eldercare Locator from anywhere in the nation toll-free at 1-800-677-1116, Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. EST. For 24-hour computer access to the Eldercare Locator, visit www.eldercare.gov.

Government Agencies Working Together

On February 24, 2004, President Bush signed an Executive Order on Human Services Transportation Coordination that calls for action to enhance access to transportation to improve mobility, job opportunities, and access to services for people who are transit dependent. The AoA, an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is supporting the President's Executive Order through a partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation/Federal Transit Administration and the *United We Ride* initiative. The five-part *United We Ride* initiative encourages government agencies and non-profit organizations to collaborate on transportation planning and to share resources so that customers are provided with the best possible services.



Create a Transportation Plan

Older Americans will feel better about retiring from driving if they know there are alternative ways to get around and get what they need. Help your older loved one create a list of transportation alternatives. It will allow him to focus on the many resources that are available.

- **Senior transportation vans or cabs.** Look in the phone book for transportation services, or call your local Area Agency on Aging.
- **Neighbors, church volunteers, family, and friends.** Make a list of phone numbers and encourage your relative to ask for rides. It will not only help fulfill transportation needs, it will also build a social network.
- **Home food delivery.** Many communities have "Meals on Wheels" programs that serve seniors. Many restaurants and grocery stores also deliver for free or a small charge.
- **Medicine by mail.** Mail-order prescription drug plans, available through many healthcare plans, are easy and often substantially less expensive.
- **Shopping from home.** In this day and age, most consumer products are available through catalogs and the Internet. On-line shopping also provides access to a much broader array of goods and services than any brick-and-mortar establishment.

As the nation celebrates Older Americans Month in May, you can learn more about transportation options and other topics by visiting www.aoa.gov. The theme of Older Americans Month—"Celebrate Long-Term Living!"—highlights the goal of organizations throughout the Aging Network to help older Americans stay healthy and active longer. For information about local resources, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116, or visit www.eldercare.gov.

